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Editorial: Take care with for-profits

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Higher education has become a highly lucrative business lately, with for-profit career schools growing at two to three times the rate of traditional private colleges and public universities. This could be a good thing for nontraditional students, who seek efficient career training on convenient schedules, and it might be a good way to bolster the skills of the nation's work force.

But House Republicans are trying to push the bar a bit too far this week as they debate the Higher Education Act, the main federal law that subsidizes tuition and research at colleges and universities. They want profit-making schools to have equal standing with public universities and nonprofit colleges in the chase for federal scientific and research grants. Before opening this huge chest of taxpayer money to profit-making businesses, Congress should adopt a prudent proposal by Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., that would have the Government Accountability Office, Congress' audit arm, set some standards for transparency and accountability in the research programs of for-profit schools.

No one in Congress is trying to limit the ability of for-profit schools to compete for students, or for students to choose their place of study. Indeed, students at these schools are already eligible for most forms of federal tuition aid.

But research grants from federal agencies such as the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Department of Agriculture are another matter. They should be reserved for scholars who have committed themselves to peer-reviewed research, not the pursuit of profit, and should produce results that advance a public research agenda -- whether it's medicine or engineering or food safety -- not some private shareholder priority.

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